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ABSTRACT

A study investigated what Scottish and English young people consider important life skills, how they believe they develop them, and how necessary they see them to their future lives. More than 200 16-21-year-olds examined photographs of events related to basic life tasks, family, close relationships, work or school and leisure activities and then identified skills involved. Life skills they identified as important largely agreed with those described by education authorities. They considered the most important, essential life skills to be communication and interpersonal skills. Young people believed these skills were also those that employers consider essential; valued and saw employment experience as the major influence in developing life skills; added creative and aesthetic skills and physical and coordination skills to the traditional list of key skills; described wide applications of problem solving and critical thinking skills; and saw family, work, friends, and school as the main influences on skill development. Future considerations were identified as school curriculum; work experience; creative and aesthetic skills and motor coordination skills; interagency cooperation; information and communication technology; socially disadvantaged young people; community education services; learning support; and promotion of a culture of learning. (Appendixes include 17 references and life skills matrixes for 16- and 21-year olds.) (YLB)

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Young People's Life-Skills and the Future

Janet Powney
Kevin Lowden
Stuart Hall

RESEARCH REPORT SERIES

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Young People's Life-Skills and the Future

Janet Powney
Kevin Lowden
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The Scottish Council for
Research in Education

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Contents

	Page No
Acknowledgements	**iv**
Foreword	**v**
Executive Summary	**1**
The project	1
The context	1
Key findings	1
Issues for consideration	2
The way forward	3
1: Implications of the study for developing young people's life-skills	**5**
The project	5
What are life-skills?	5
Young people's views on important life-skills	8
The implications of young people's perspectives	10
Redefining the school curriculum	12
Lifelong learning	17
2: The study and findings in detail	**19**
Aims of the study	19
Research methods and evidence	19
Outcomes	21
Detailed findings	21
How can the key-skills be better developed?	33
Concluding comments	34
The way forward	35
References	**36**
Appendices	
1A: Life-skills matrix for 16 year olds	38
1B: Life-skills matrix for 21 year olds	39

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Foreword

The Lifelong Learning Foundation is committed to initiating research, encouraging debate and supporting developments which will ensure that, in the future, every individual will experience learning as a lifelong activity.

Some psychologists argue that individuals are born with certain innate learning mechanisms or learning instincts (Dawkins, 1986). However, a positive attitude to acquiring skills and knowledge is not always maintained throughout life. Young people and adults appear to share some agreement as to the life-skills necessary in employment, human relationships and leisure pursuits. Nevertheless, for many young people, a mismatch is apparent between what they believe it is important to learn and what they have to learn to be rewarded for progress at school.

School education is intended to prepare young people for life, but a formal curriculum does not usually foster a full range of life-skills. School targets, where defined in terms of examination results and reported in performance tables, only relate to a portion of pupils' lives. Over the past decade, many initiatives have recognised the limitations of examination based school education and have put forward descriptions of competence and key skills intended to refocus schools' curriculum on essential learning.

The project reported here, sponsored by the Lifelong Learning Foundation and illustrative of their commitment to supporting policy development with relevant research, furthers this trend by asking young people about their own priorities in developing life-skills. Their voices reveal what is important to them and their reasonable concerns and add to our understanding of how skills are developed. Listening to what young people say is necessary if teachers, training organisations and employers are to learn and develop. Hearing and acting on what young people say will ensure changes, in education and training provision, which will support and enhance young people's motivation and capacity to learn.

The development of lifelong learning has become a political priority.

> *To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well educated, well equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change and the challenge of the information and communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. ... As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. ... To realise our ambition, we must all develop and sustain a regard for learning at whatever age.*
>
> *(David Blunkett 1998)*

The Department for Education and Employment reflects support for lifelong learning in its aims and objectives.

> *To support economic growth and improve the nation's competitiveness and quality of life by raising standards of educational achievement and skill and by promoting an efficient and flexible labour market ... to encourage lifetime learning so that people can use their skills and knowledge to compete effectively in a changing labour market.*
>
> *(Department for Education and Employment 1995)*

In Scotland, Lifelong learning has become a major focus of the Scottish Executive:

> *Lifelong learning is for everyone today. Not just for the few or those leaving school ...There has never been a more important time for people to continue the learning process into adulthood, no matter how much or how little they achieved at school or in post-school education. As a Government, we are also committed to promoting greater social inclusion in Scotland. We want to encourage a society in which everyone, regardless of their personal or economic circumstances, is able to make the most of the opportunities available to them ... My vision for lifelong learning is that all sections of society should feel able to help themselves, through extending their knowledge and education, in whatever direction they wish.*
>
> *(Minister for Enterprise & Lifelong Learning, Henry McLeish. 30 August 1999 Redefining Schooling: a Challenge to a Closed Society)*

The urgent question now is:

> how can education at school not only co-exist with, but actually promote, the development of life-skills and lifelong learning?

Executive Summary

The project

The Lifelong Learning Foundation commissioned researchers at the Scottish Council for Research in Education to investigate what young people consider as important life-skills, how they believe they develop these skills and how necessary they see them to their future lives. The researchers wanted to represent the voices of young people and start from their perception of reality. More than 200 16-21 year olds took part in the project, commenting on the skills they could observe or elicit from photographs which other youngsters had taken of their everyday experiences. They indicated how they thought life-skills were acquired, their importance and their relationship to employment and predicted the skills they themselves would need in the future.

The context

Most recent definitions of life, key, or core skills and competences describe similar basic abilities, although using slightly different terminology and differing emphasis. The lists of skills or competences seen as essential by Department for Education and Employment, the Scottish Executive and the Royal Society of Arts all include:

- literacy and communication
- numeracy
- interpersonal skills – working with others
- critical thinking and reasoning abilities
- problem solving skills
- information and communication technology.

Young people considered photographs of events related to basic life tasks, family and close relationships, work or school and their leisure activities and identified the skills they believed were involved.

Key findings

The life-skills identified by young people as important largely agree with those described by education authorities and listed above. In particular, young people:

- consider the most important and essential life-skills are communication and interpersonal skills; these are seen as necessary in most of the circumstances of their life: at home, in school or employment and during leisure activities
- believe, on the basis of personal experience, these skills they see as of prime importance are also those that employers consider essential
- value employment experience and see it as the major influence in developing life-skills, particularly communication and interpersonal skills
- extend the traditional list of key skills by adding creative and aesthetic skills and physical and coordination skills

- perceive ICT skills as important but also believe that these can be 'picked up' or developed as and when necessary
- describe wide applications of problem solving and critical thinking skills ranging across making informed decisions about what to do in their leisure time, formulating possible outcomes of interpersonal actions or understanding power structures in employment and peer groups
- are usually clear about the origins of their skills; they see the main influences on the development of skills as family, work, friends and school.

Young people stress life-skills on their own are insufficient to operate successfully in employment and society in general. They also highlight the importance of:

- qualities such as commitment, motivation and patience for personal success
- the possession of pre-requisite knowledge to perform efficiently.

Despite the varied social backgrounds, levels of educational qualification, extent of work experience and difference in age of the young people taking part in the project, strikingly common themes emerged. One strong difference related to gender was revealed.

- Only young women report that the media, particularly TV and lifestyle magazines, influence the development of their personal skills.

There appeared to be little variation related to ethnic background, but this might be explained by the fact that ethnic minorities were underrepresented in the project.

Issues for consideration

A different perspective on life-skills

Although young people agreed with the importance of the recognised lists of life-skills, there emerged two significant variations. Young people:

- added two further areas of key skills related to creativity and aesthetics and to physical and coordination skills suggesting a broader than usual interpretation of life-skills
- are very confident that it will be relatively easy for them to upgrade their information and communication technology skills when the need arises; this confidence may be misplaced and might be attributable to young people being insufficiently aware of the considerable demands made in using ICT in various work situations; their perspectives appear narrower than those of many adults who see ICT skills as vital to cope with leisure and work challenges in the immediate future. On the other hand, anxiety about the technology may be characteristic of those who did not have access to it at an early age.

Developing life-skills

Work experience

Young people believe that they acquire a range of crucial transferable skills during work experience, whether this be school organised work experience or actual employment. This suggests a current underestimation of work experience as a factor

in developing life-skills. The implication is that work experience should be systematically developed to promote gains in young people's skills.
This finding also has implications for the long term unemployed who can be seen to be doubly disadvantaged. They may be lacking in certain life-skills which limits their employment prospects and whilst they are not in work, they are deprived of opportunities to develop their life-skills further.

The family

The family supports the initial development of young people's life-skills and provides an important supporting role in later skills development. This has implications for those young people who, for whatever reason, are deprived of parental and family support and could face particular disadvantage in developing a wide range of core skills.

School

While schooling helps to develop numeracy, communication and problem solving, it is less likely to be reported as a main source of interpersonal or information technology skills. This rather negative appraisal of school's contribution to the development of life-skills may be a reflection of the informants' ages (16-21 years) or a result of the secondary school curriculum which is largely fragmented into subject studies along with an overloaded personal and social education curriculum. The use of such initiatives as Progress File may help young people to become more aware of their learning skill needs and help them to plan their next activities.

Lifelong learning

The term 'life-skills' may be interpreted in two ways:

- as the skills necessary to lead a full life and
- as the skills necessary to learn throughout life.

For lifelong learning to become a reality, a full life will be one in which learning activities continue at whatever age.

Other important influences

Young people's accounts demonstrate that the effective application of life-skills is influenced by individual interests, motivation and knowledge. Attempts to promote the development and use of life-skills must acknowledge these individual variations.

The way forward

Consideration should be given to:

1 ***Each school's curriculum*** and their adaptation to ensure that the development of life-skills is accommodated and guaranteed provision is made across all subject areas.

2 ***Work experience a***nd its primacy as an arena for the development and practice of life-skills and wider dissemination of 'best practice' in arranged work experience.

3 ***Creative and aesthetic skills and motor coordination skills*** and the importance attached to these by young people; the use of creativity in original and positive responses to changing opportunities in life experience.

4 ***Interagency cooperation*** and how the value of learning opportunities, particularly the development of life-skills, can be enhanced through such cooperation.

5 ***Information and communication technology*** and how curriculum provision, courses and teaching, can keep abreast of developments.

6 ***Socially disadvantaged young people*** and their poverty of aspiration; their particular needs for additional provision and for role models who are successfully employed.

7 ***Community education services*** and their importance to those living in rural areas; the ways in which they can make provision which compensates social disadvantage.

8 ***Learning support*** for young people to help them take control of their skill development needs; for employers, trainers and teachers to help them change their practice to meet the needs of young people in changing circumstances.

9 ***The promotion of a culture of learning*** including encouraging individuals to learn and continuing to remove the varied barriers to learning.

1: Implications of the study for developing young people's life-skills

There is no such thing as an ability that is too useless, too crooked or too small. It only depends on what you do with it

(B Hoff in The Tao of Pooh 1982)

The project

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) white paper 'Excellence in Schools' sets out the government's priority of ensuring that all young people will reach the age of 16 with the skills attitudes and personal qualities that will give them a secure foundation for lifelong learning, work and citizenship in a rapidly changing world. This study, funded by the Lifelong Learning Foundation, focuses on what skills young people consider will be important to them throughout their lives. It seeks to establish whether their views coincide with adults' definitions of important life-skills.

The researchers wanted to represent the voices of young people and start from their perception of reality. More than 200 young people who took part in the project commented on the skills they could observe or elicit from photographs other youngsters had taken of their everyday experiences. They indicated how they thought life-skills were acquired, their importance and their relationship to employment and gave us their prediction of the skills they themselves would need in the future. Details of how we gathered the views of young people (aged 16–21) are given in section ? and their words are used in support of statements made in the report. The photographs in the text are a selection from those taken by young people to illustrate their lives and subsequently used to focus discussion during interviews.

What are life-skills?

Official descriptions of life-skills

The main definitions of life-skills, developed during the past decade, include similar basic abilities although using slightly different terminology and containing differences of emphasis. The first phase of this project involved a review of the related literature and the construction of skills charts which young people might be expected to attain at age 16 and at age 21. (The lower and upper ends of the age range included in the project.) Subsequently, these tables were discussed with young people to ensure that their understanding of the skill definitions was clear and that the listings in the tables were accepted as relevant to their experience. This led to some, relatively minor, changes and the final tables are set out in the Appendix.

In drafting the charts, the researchers drew from skill descriptions listed by the (DfEE) in *Preparing Young People for Adult Life* (1999); *Progress File Achievement Planner*

(1999); by the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC) in *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stage (1999)*; and by the Higher Still Development Unit, Scotland in *Higher still: the draft frameworks (1996).*

There is a high degree of agreement between the descriptions of life-skills in these publications.

Table 1

Life-skills	included by DfEE	SCCC
communication	✓	✓
application of number	✓	✓
working with others	✓	✓
problem solving	✓	✓
ICT	✓	✓
improving your own learning and performance	✓	*

* The SCCC regard life-skills as dependent on individual dispositions. Schools are expected to foster the development of:

- a commitment to learning
- respect and care for self
- respect and care for others
- a sense of social responsibility

These 'dispositions' seem to correlate with the skill 'improving own learning and performance' and an extended definition of 'working with others'.

In England and Wales, and Scotland, schools are expected to support the development of life-skills through their different national curriculum arrangements. In Scotland the core skills framework provides definitions of performance which can be assessed and certificated as part of an overall qualifications framework. Additionally, the SCCC (now Learning and Teaching Scotland) regard these skills as personal resources which depend upon an individual's dispositions and capabilities to apply them successfully. Schools are expected to foster positive dispositions in their students.

During the project, nothing young people said in interviews contested the relevance of the life-skills listed by DfEE and SCCC. However, young people drew attention to two omissions:

- aesthetic and creative skills
- physical and coordination skills.

Interestingly, in an alternative approach to describing life-skills, these skills appear to be, if not included then, implied. Definitions of competence are listed by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in *Redefining Schooling: A Challenge to a Closed Society* (1998) and *Opening Minds: Education for the 21st Century* (1999).

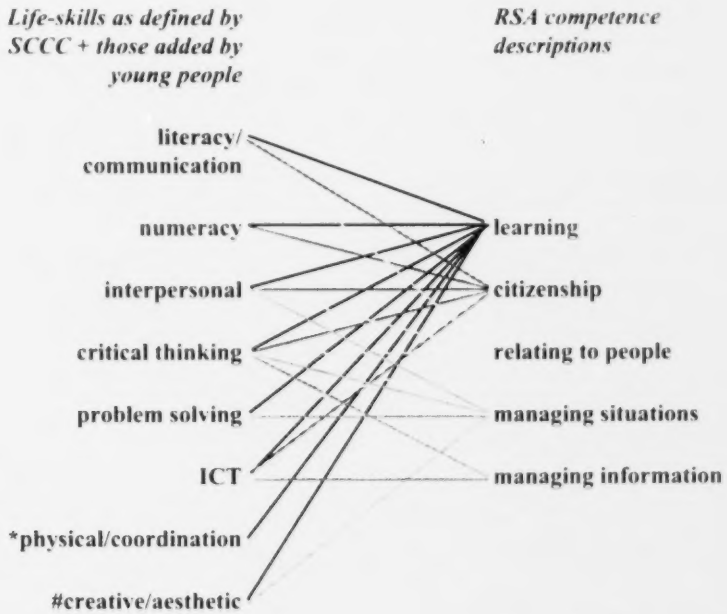
The RSA suggests that the national curriculum should be presented and assessed in terms of competences. The RSA specimen competence-led curriculum emphasises the role of rigorous formative assessment.

At first sight, the RSA descriptions of competence appear to differ markedly from the life-skills listed by DfEE and SCCC. Competences are grouped under five headings:

- learning
- citizenship
- relating to people
- managing situations
- managing information.

However, it is possible to map the competence descriptions directly on to the composite list of life-skills drawn from the DfEE and SCCC and supplemented by the additional skills suggested by the young people taking part in the project. This mapping is shown in Table 2.

Table 2



* RSA refers to 'spatial understanding' as a competence in learning. Although listed alongside literacy and numeracy, this may be understood as including physical and coordination skills as well as 2 and 3 dimensional geometry.

\# RSA refers to 'understanding own creative talents' as a competence in learning; the competences in managing situations include those which imply a creative response to business opportunities: 'manage change', 'develop capacity for being entrepreneurial and initiative taking', 'manage risk and uncertainty'.

The development of definitions of competence and life-skills was a means to an end. The purpose was to refocus education and training onto the acquisition of crucial skills. Over the past decade the means has gradually become the end. Ever more detailed descriptions of skills are still being produced and debated, whilst changes of emphasis in schools, colleges and employment training are only slowly taking effect.

Young people's views on important life-skills

Among the young people we interviewed for this study there was a striking consensus about the most important life-skills for young people. They constantly referred to communication and interpersonal skills as being essential to deal competently with almost any aspect of life reflected in the photographs put before them. These interpersonal skills might include generally getting on with people, being able to decode body language or having the confidence to present yourself and get yourself heard.

'Communication and social skills are essential ... you have to make an impression on new people ... you have to be able to talk to strangers, express yourself and voice opinions. If you can't do this, you can't do anything'.

(sixth formers, Scotland)

'Team work is important. Qualifications alone don't make a good worker.'

(sixth formers, Scotland)

'Employers want communication skills. Business is based on this.'

(HND students, Gateshead)

'It's no good having the other skills if you can't deal with other people. You need to be able to get on with people.'

(community project, Gateshead)

'Communication skills are the most important because you are using these all of the time ... on the phone, job interviews and impressing people. ... They help you cope and get by'

(unemployed male, Gateshead)

Given the open nature of the research, there was a remarkable similarity in young people's perspectives regardless of their educational level or where they lived. Most of the young people had had some work experience on which to base their views of employers' needs. They perceived that employers would value interpersonal skills as well as literacy and numeracy as useful transferable skills. They also considered it important in employment to be able to work on your own and to take initiative or follow conventions where appropriate.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

The older generations are excited by, and see the immense potential arising from, developments in information and communication technologies. Mobile telephones, CD Roms, the Internet, email, video communications and interactive technologies present new opportunities for access to information, greater geographical mobility and dramatic shifts in the resources available for lifelong learning. However, people need to be competent in many life-skills if they are to take advantage of the opportunities that such changes present. Some educationalists are fearful that those who are not gaining access to ICT experience and developing their ICT skills will be excluded from employment opportunities and participating fully in society. Alongside the danger of social exclusion of those who cannot afford the costs of equipment and extended telephone access, there is already evidence that there are gender differences in the acquisition of ICT skills (Powney *et al* 2000). There seems to be a bias towards males in the design of software and games and more men than women are participating in computing and ICT courses in further and higher education.

Young people contributing to the study reported here are more nonchalant than their elders about acquiring ICT skills. Young people who have grown up with ICT find it unremarkable. They are not fearful but take the technology in their stride. Unlike many older people, young people are generally not reluctant to use and experiment with ICT. They trust that the technology is robust and will not easily break.

'You need patience for a lot of games, you need to keep your temper, ... have to handle your frustrations.'

(sixth former, Scotland)

Young people are confident that they will be able to acquire ICT skills as, and when, they need them and therefore they are not anxious about any lack in their current skill level. This immediately raises the question of whether their perceptions match their actual abilities. Our informants came from three geographical areas which are diverse

socially, culturally and economically. Some of these young people will attain GCSE A levels or Highers whereas others are lower achievers who probably only use ICT in the home and for technologically unsophisticated leisure pursuits.

There is some doubt as to how far our informants are aware of the full spectrum of ICT applications. Rather different skills are required in programming video recorders, playing computer games, shopping on the web and using mobile telephones to those deployed, for example, in writing programmes, using statistical packages and using model simulations. Many uses are only required in employment and the unemployed or young people who have not had extensive work experience may neither appreciate the quality of the skills required nor have opportunities to acquire them.

Even where young people acknowledged that they lacked certain skills, few had developed strategies to enhance their skills. It seems not of sufficient priority with 'em. Although they may not actively seek opportunities to extend their ICT skills, they may be willing to respond to invitations to do so. Such skills make best sense in the context of using ICT for specified purposes. Young people are critical of the lack of breadth and depth in the school ICT curriculum which appears to focus on word processing for most students. The majority are not supported in using spreadsheets or finding the most effective ways of searching through the web (Plowman 1999).

The development of ICT possibilities has left the education system far behind. Most schools are under resourced with ICT equipment and appropriate software but more importantly have not been able to realise in practice the immense potential for learning across the curriculum, with the result that some subjects, even mathematics, in secondary schools make little or no use of ICT (Williams 1999).

The picture emerging from various sources is of young people who are confident of their abilities to develop their ICT skills without necessarily knowing what would be involved and without any clear plan about how to improve their competences. ICT capability extends far beyond most people's leisure and home use (predominantly games and chatting on the internet). The main opportunities to learn come through employment but access to employment may be denied to young people with low levels of ICT skills.

In planning work placements for young people, the inclusion of familiarisation with work-related ICT applications would immediately enhance the value of the experience.

The implications of young people's perspectives

Employment

There is no doubt that the needs of the economy and of employers gave a major impetus to the development of key skills as shown in both the following examples quoted in the Higher Still framework (Higher Still Development Unit 1998):

> *Employers' expectations of their employees are changing. Their commitment is needed to achieve corporate objectives and this means using their abilities, ideas*

and skills. ... The education and training which employees will require will need to be broadly based, promoting not just a narrow technical understanding of the job but competence in the broader work context.

(Confederation of British Industry in Towards a skills revolution 1989)

The future of Scotland's economy is likely to depend more than ever before on inventiveness, enterprise and skills. Individuals will work in a very different and rapidly moving, labour market. Success will require a strengthened understanding of the skills and attitudes required for work. At the top of the agenda is an understanding of core skills.

(Education for Work Conference November 1997)

While employment is an important aspect of most people's lives, it does not comprise the whole of their lives. We also have to fulfil basic tasks within everyday life; we relate to family and friends and follow leisure pursuits. Most definitions of lifelong learning are consistent with the Lifelong Learning Foundation's view that education for the individual is necessary for life fulfilment (including, but not exclusively, employability)

... with the exception of specific, technical areas, the skills needed to achieve employability and self fulfilment are substantially the same. Eagerness and ability to learn, problem solving, critical thinking, reflection, personal and interpersonal skills, managing change and self esteem, for example, are the building blocks for success in work, couple relationships, parenting and responsible citizenship.

(Lifelong Learning Foundation, 1998)

Work experience

Nevertheless, young people are clear about the important benefits of work experience. A placement in work draws to their attention the skills they will need if they are to obtain and retain employment and progress in their careers. A few of the young people were already working full time when interviewed. Many others had part-time evening and weekend jobs. The schools they attended had often organised a short period of work experience.

There is general agreement in principle about the value of employment in supporting and extending the development of life-skills and it is worth considering the quality and amount of work experience that young people have at different stages of growing up. For example, (Weston *et al* 1996) in a study, which evaluated the impact of work experience on the development of core skills, found that pre-16 placements led to a significant increase in young people's core skills, particularly their personal and interpersonal skills. Inevitably some young people will gain more from placements than others but an important finding in Weston's study was that work experience helped individuals to fill gaps in their skills development, enabling them to 'catch up'.

Work experience will be especially important for those young people who come from family backgrounds where there is frequent or sustained unemployment and, because of this, possibly have no role models for basic work habits such as being punctual, reliable and able to relate to colleagues and the public as part of the job. It is in

employers' best interests to foster these skills rather than to discourage some young people by providing them only with tasks that are so tedious that the youngsters become quickly bored and frustrated and the work experience reduces motivation for future employment. To be successful, work experience placements have to relate to the individual young person's needs, interests and abilities. This is especially true for those individuals who are at risk of low achievement (Saunders *et al* 1996). These are the youngsters who may continue to be disadvantaged by lack of access to additional training throughout their lives.

> *The vast majority of employers provide some training to their workforce, but this investment is unevenly spread and variable in quality. Younger employees and those who already have good educational qualifications receive more training. People with degrees are over six times more likely to be trained than people with no qualifications.*
>
> *(Saunders et al 1998)*

Additional advice and incentives should be available to encourage employers to provide suitable learning experiences for young people on placements. Young people's learning should be monitored by employers, possibly in cooperation with school teachers, so that placements draw on their young workers' existing skills and knowledge and so that there can be regular feedback from the young people about their perceptions of what they are learning. Many work placement schemes expect young people to reflect on what they have learned about themselves through working. If this process is formalised, young workers should be able to record their experiences in ways that provide the foundation for their curriculum vitae.

Getting the best from, and for, employees

A pertinent question in relation to lifelong learning and employment is how can employers best identify the life-skills of prospective employees especially where such skills may be difficult to demonstrate in an interview. Employers and trainers may not easily be able to clarify the skills and training needs of young employees. If there are examples of probationary periods being used to identify life-skill needs, with subsequent assisted programmes of experience to pursue identified needs, they are extraordinary. Examples of this best practice should be widely disseminated. All practice, even best practice, needs support. The difficult tasks faced in the organisation of work experience could be facilitated by the proposal from the Lifelong Learning Foundation to integrate a toolkit for life into the education system which would be continued through and after employment.

Redefining the school curriculum

Education is perceived by young people to have contributed rather less than one might expect towards the development of life-skills, especially when compared with the substantial impact made by work experience. The responses of young people participating in this project imply there is a case for increasing the priority of work based experience. Individually tailored placements would increase their practical skills, giving them confidence to talk to people and deal with those who are argumentative. At work, more than at school, they learn to be trusted and relied upon.

In the best of these experiences, they feel empowered to take control of their own and their fellow trainees learning.

The perception of the minor role which formal education plays in skill development may underestimate the cumulative value of compulsory schooling and could be a reflection of the age group participating in the research. By the age of 16, many of the early skills of reading, writing and numeracy are taken for granted. As young people are looking forward to the next stage of their career where interpersonal and communication skills are so important, they may underestimate the value of schooling in building the foundations of their learning and knowledge and its contribution to understanding how to get on with other people. Additionally, these perceptions point to too great a rift between school and work experience.

It is timely for the relationship between life-skills, development through work and the school curriculum to be reviewed so that work experience becomes more integrated with the rest of the school curriculum. Ways must be found to ensure that learning and teaching better support the development of life-skills.

The curriculum and work experience

As yet the school curriculum does not capitalise sufficiently on the work experience which schools organise. Weston and colleagues (1996) noted that improvements in young people's core skills occurred from work placements without much evidence of prior school planning and the setting of explicit targets. Therefore, they suggest, the benefits of such experience might be even greater that if schools were more systematic in planning work experience and setting targets for outcomes.

Work experience for young people

- is most valuable when it relates to the young person's needs, interests and abilities;
- provides accelerated skill development, particularly for young people of low attainment;
- is essential if young people come from families where unemployment is accepted as the norm;
- is enhanced if
  - the young person perceives that personal skill development is built in to the programme;
  - school and placement organisations cooperate and priority is given to clear communication between teacher, employer and trainee;
  - the young person is able to make an on-going assessment of skill development and experience;
  - employers recognise that they are investing in a seedbed of future employees and feel supported in this enterprise.

Work experience tends to be a single event occurring towards the end of compulsory schooling, standing alone and not integrated fully into the school curriculum. Specialist teachers may regard work experience as a frustrating interruption to pupils'

subject studies. Such teachers often remain in ignorance of the nature and effects of their pupils' work experience and do not subsequently build on it. The teachers themselves may devalue work experience, considering it less worthwhile than do their pupils. This could be an added source of discontent or even friction for those pupils who are already feeling alienated from school learning and activities.

Learning, teaching and life-skills

The fragmentation of the curriculum is also a factor in how schools support the development of life-skills. In general, secondary schools are currently organised as a series of subject lessons of about 40 minutes, occasionally including a double period, of 80 minutes, in some subjects. Pupils move around the school to join the appropriate subject teacher whom they meet at most once a day and sometimes only once a week. Subject teachers are met by a different group of about 25–30 pupils every 40 minutes or so. Both pupils and teachers are constrained by having to meet the syllabus requirements for public examinations and schools are predominantly assessed on the basis of their students' success in these examinations. The holistic development of an individual pupil's interpersonal and communication skills may be left to chance, although that development would particularly benefit those with low confidence, who lack independence and self-presentational skills.

It is difficult to move beyond the formal curriculum within the time span of the 'normal' day or term or school year. In May this year there was considerable press and political coverage about Laura Spence from Tyneside whose application to Magdalen College Oxford had been rejected. Hugh Reilly in the Scotsman 31 May 200 reminds us that

> *"...as with all forms of extra-curricular activity, debating clubs have declined greatly and today such confidence building activity is the exception rather than the rule"*

The point he was making was that lacking confidence is more typical among pupils in comprehensive schools compared with those from public schools.

The restrictions on subject teachers in terms of their primary roles and responsibilities may make it difficult for them to work in different aspects of life-skills. Some certainly try to adopt methods of teaching which encourage children's independent learning, interaction and collaboration with their peers.

One strategy has been to focus on pupils' self evaluation of their learning by documenting their successes through using Progress File. This successor to the National Record of Achievement (NRA) is designed to equip students with the knowledge, understanding and skills to plan and manage their own learning, including making effective and sustained transitions within and between education, training and working life. By working through Progress File students are expected to increase their motivation to achieve and promote a positive attitude to lifelong learning. In the longer term, their realistic appraisal of what they can do will provide the basis for their future education, training and career goals.

There is as yet little systematic empirical evidence that the use of Progress File results in demonstrably better skills, knowledge or attitudes than otherwise might be expected. The preceding Records of Achievement had its strongest impact on career planning and also improved personal and interpersonal skills (Saunders *et al* 1996). The DfEE has set up ten demonstration projects to trial and evaluate the Progress File materials and their use both with school pupils and with older students in further education and employment. The file is also being evaluated in use by those wishing to enhance their professional careers: for example, newly qualified teachers.

An important issue in evaluating Progress File is to see whether or not the purposes of supporting individuals' increasing employability and personal fulfilment are both met. In theory, it is possible that pupils could monitor their developing capabilities in the two areas of development they think are often missing in life-skills discussion: aesthetic and creative skills and physical and coordination skills. These, like other life-skills, are only assessed as part of the curriculum if the student is specialising in expressive arts and physical education. The idea of a creative and positive response to changing situations as an important life-skill and one which could be assessed in all pupils is included in the RSA descriptions of competence. It must be recognised that some teachers and employers may find originality and creativity in younger people threatening.

Although life-skills are vital factors in gaining formal qualifications, the ability to get on with people or solve problems are not in themselves assessed as achievements. They are assumed in their application in science, literature, modern languages and other curriculum areas. Taking this to the next level, schools do not score highly in performance tables because their students are able to work with other people, have good motor coordination or can use ICT effectively. Such factors may be considered by Her Majesty's Inspectorate as contributing to the overall ethos of a school but only attainment measures (the levels and numbers of formal qualifications gained) are published in performance tables which stand alone in representing the quality of a school and of the education it provides.

The promotion of education is stated as a priority by our current Government. However, there would seem to be a danger that this is being too narrowly interpreted. Performance tables are assumed to be what parents want in order to select the 'best' education for their children. It is reassuring for parents to see that a school is regarded as a 'good' school, but many parents' priorities are their children's happiness, social adjustment and self confidence, none of which can be guaranteed by a school which is top of the league tables for academic success. Some parents see the knowledge and cognitive skills associated with success at school as important but secondary. Schooling could, and should provide a model of lifelong learning where all experience is an opportunity to learn or to consolidate learning.

Personal and social education

As the school curriculum is so full, the task of focusing on life-skills is often confined to the slot in the curriculum known variously as Personal and Social Education (PSE),

Personal and Social Development (PSD), or more recently Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). This usually comprises what we might consider vital common sense knowledge and decision making skills. Over the school year, in one lesson a week, PSE may be expected to cover a wide range of areas such as health (including sex and drug education and diet), personal safety, relationships, diversity, independence and responsibility, membership of a democratic society, and making the most of one's own and others' abilities. These areas figure in the review of PSHE commissioned by David Blunkett (DfEE (2) 1999) as part of a strategy to raise the profile of PSHE. The review suggests that good practice in relation to PSE depends on a whole school approach where personal and social development is taught through any and every subject. This parallels the proposal by the Lifelong Learning Foundation for a 'toolkit for life' integrated into traditional subject areas.

Current practice suggests some difficulties, because:

- if it is a generally assigned duty, some subject teachers may not see PSHE as within their expertise and primary responsibilities
- decision making skills and other components of PSHE are not formally assessed, they may be regarded by teachers as subservient to those areas which contribute to students' formal attainment and schools' performance indicators
- the secondary school curriculum is cramped, teachers may need to adopt what they see as the most efficient learning and teaching methods which could be in conflict with pupils exerting and developing their interpersonal skills.

As research has shown previously (McPake and Powney 1998), teachers and pupils rarely have 'conversations', as mutually respecting partners, such as might take place at home, between adults, or between pupils.

Links between schools and other agencies

At present, schools have little imperative or resources to promote links with employers and other agencies who can support the development of life-skills. Nevertheless there are some collaborative projects. For example: this SCRE project identified a drop-in clinic in Ryton, Northumbria organised jointly by school, health and youth projects working together to meet those needs of young people that could not be met in schools. The initiative for this project came from health promotion and as the school was unable to make appropriate provision, the youth project could and did. Everyone seemed to gain from this cooperation. The local school was relieved that the clinic was neither their responsibility nor a resource liability and the young people were more comfortable using the drop-in clinic than school for advice and information about relationships and health matters.

If we are looking at the holistic development of life-skills, is it feasible to expect coherent planning between the various agencies engaged with young people. Presently, each providing agency may be too constrained by its own goals, rules and resources to support cross-agency partnerships. As yet, not all community projects are involved with employers other than in relation to sponsorship. Career services work with

employers but this sometimes proves to be difficult especially where young people are from families with a long history of unemployment which has possibly made young people have negative attitudes towards employment. The involvement of local employers in collaborative projects would enhance the perception young people hold of the relevance of such projects.

Lifelong learning

There is some ambiguity in the term life-skills. They may be understood as the skills which must be acquired in order to lead a satisfactory and full life. Or they may be considered as the skills necessary to continue to learn throughout life. Through research and development, the Lifelong Learning Foundation is working towards the achievement of a society in which every individual:

- values learning
- has access to opportunities to learn and develop life-skills and
- maintains an active interest in learning throughout life.

Clearly, this definition of lifelong learning includes both interpretations. An illustration of the need for lifelong learning is seen in older generations who have to learn ICT skills for technologies that did not exist when they were younger. Life-skills are important not just now but later. Our expectation is that key or core skills will improve through interaction and experience. That, although new skills may be required as life changes, acquired skills will continue to be honed and extended.

Young people are clear that certain life-skills are fundamental for personal success in a range of contexts but they also stress the need for particular personal qualities such as motivation, tenacity and patience. In addition, they highlight that certain tasks require the possession of pre-requisite knowledge. While very young children might have a basic innate capacity to learn, by adulthood, the desire to learn and develop oneself is not universal. A range of influences can inhibit such attitudes and reduce the confidence and willingness of individuals to pursue structured learning opportunities. The current debate and attention focused on developing skills will also have to take into account how we promote a culture of learning, encourage individuals to learn and continue to remove the varied barriers to learning.

Lifelong learning depends on a predisposition to want to learn and the self-knowledge of personal change as learning takes place. It is interesting that most of the young people spontaneously mentioned their leisure activities and sports but few of them had notions of how to use their broad educational activities within their personal life to extend their skills and knowledge. Nor were they always aware that they were 'being educated': that they were learning new skills. A community education provider engaged young people in organising a rave which developed some of their life-skills. The young people did not appear to realise that this was a deliberate educational agenda devised by the community education providers but was aware that their skills had been developed. The skill of monitoring and reviewing experiences for any learning achieved (as being promoted by Progress File) will be of immense

benefit in getting the most from life and in developing a life plan that incorporates but goes beyond employment.

Young people consider that they learn their most important communication and interpersonal skills from a range of sources. Families and, clearly, parents provide role models and set the rules for social behaviour. There are clear implications of disadvantage and the need for compensatory provision for those with dysfunctional families, where family relationships are disrupted and for those young people brought up in care. As young people move outside the family, interpersonal skills are tested, practised and improved by interacting with peers and work colleagues.

All members of our society, regardless of class, culture, gender and physical or intellectual ability are entitled to support in developing their life-skills.

2: The study and findings in detail

Aims of the study

The aims of this research project were to

1 identify the main life-skills used by young people (16–21) in a variety of work, leisure, home and family situations

2 compare these life-skills with those identified by others in the literature and elsewhere

3 assess how and where young people attained their life-skills and how they might be developed further

4 make recommendations for future developments to enhance the life-skills of young people.

Research methods and evidence

The research approach was firmly based on the voices of young people, comparing their views with more established thoughts on life-skills. The first stage of the project involved reviewing the literature on life-skills and subsequently devising tables of the life-skills young people might be expected to possess at 16 years and at 21 years old: (the lower and upper ends of the age range in which we were interested).

The original drafts of the tables were based on established lists of core skills as found in DfEE and Higher Still documents. The drafts were discussed with young people and subsequently modified at the pilot stage (please see Appendices 1A and 1B). By this means, we were able to incorporate the views of young people and their interpretation of documented life-skills. For example, the definitions of core skills initially adopted for the project discriminate between *Communication skills* and *Working with others*. The young people in our study interpreted communication skills as equating with the DfEE and Higher Still rubric of *Working with others*. They also differentiated between written communication, which they called literacy, and broader interactional communication skills. Communication was used as an umbrella term to include a range of skills such as self-presentation, negotiation, regulating self-behaviour and other interpersonal skills. They also sometimes included talking and listening skills. The tables were adapted to reflect these interpretations. The research does not argue that the classifications of core skills adopted are more 'correct' than those used by others, merely that we have attempted to reflect the frames of reference used and commonly understood by young people who form the focus of our study.

In constructing the tables we mapped the core skills against the four main life areas of: basic life tasks, family and close relationships, school and work and leisure. This enabled the researchers to relate the range of life-skills young people could possess against the contexts in which they would be deployed. We were, throughout the study, able to check and compare an idealised view of how life-skills can be utilised with the actual information on life-skills provided by young people.

To ensure that our research was grounded in young peoples' experiences and lives, we asked several young people to take photographs of typical activities and situations that they experienced over a week. This produced a total of almost 100 photographs from which we, with the help of other young people, selected nineteen activities and situations which were seen to be both typical and cover a wide enough range of activities and situations. These nineteen photographs were then used as the focus for interviews with young people aged from 16–21 years of age.

Note: Most of these photographs occur in this text; the six that are not shown depicted:

- a boy reading a bus timetable at a bus stop
- a boy coming out of a shop, checking change in his palm
- a girl driving, reversing the car
- a girl practising playing a trumpet in her bedroom
- a girl window shopping
- three generations of a family at a celebration dinner party.

Gathering the information

Interviews were conducted with young people in friendship pairs or in small groups. These interviews took place on school premises, career centres, community education or voluntary organisation offices. Interviews began by focusing on the photographs of common life events which portrayed various life-skills in action. The interviewees were asked to comment on what skills they thought the people in the photographs were demonstrating and how they thought the skills had been acquired. Following their comments on the photographs, participants were asked a number of questions regarding their own life-skills. These included:

- what life-skills they possessed
- how they had acquired them
- what they believed were the most important life-skills
- what life-skills they developed through work experience and employment
- what skills they felt they needed to develop for the future.

The sample

More than two hundred young people between the ages of 16–21, approximately seventy in each of three localities, were sought for interview. The chosen areas were diverse socially, culturally and economically. Two of these were in Scotland: Coatbridge and Callander and the other, Gateshead, in the north of England. Young people were identified and contacted through local community education services, schools and voluntary providers. In selecting individuals to take part, providers were asked to include as wide a range of young people as possible, with varied social background, work experience and educational qualifications. Table 3 summarises information about the informants.

Table 3: Informants

Locality	Types of provider	Males	Females	Totals
Coatbridge	Schools and Community Education Service projects	37	34	71
Gateshead	Various Community Education Service projects, schools, Tyneside Careers	30	41*	71
Callander	Schools, voluntary groups	29	32	61
Totals		96	107	203

* The Gateshead fieldwork included a young women's project which has meant more women than men are represented.

Analysis of the information collected

Using the software *Filemaker Pro* we conducted a thematic analysis of the detailed interview notes. This analysis was informed by our research questions but also by the categories or themes emerging from young peoples' responses.

The findings were subsequently compared with our initial tables of life-skills to assess how the young people's accounts compared with established definitions and understanding of life-skills.

Outcomes

The in-depth qualitative nature of the research has generated a broad evidence base which:

- provides an insight into young people's perspectives concerning their understanding of life-skills
- is of direct relevance to academics policy makers, employers, trainers and educationalists
- is robust and replicable by other studies using similar methods and provides a starting point for a larger quantitative study.

Detailed findings

This section discusses the major findings of the research, setting out the main themes to emerge in relation to the key research areas. It focuses on three questions:

- what are the key life-skills?
- how are the key life-skills acquired?
- how can the key life-skills be further developed?

What are the key life-skills?

From discussion of the photographs, interviewees readily identified the majority of those life-skills outlined in the tables of life-skills (please see Appendices 1A and 1B).

However, some skills arose more often in discussion than others. These were: communication skills, literacy and numeracy. Less frequently mentioned were critical thinking and problem solving and ICT skills. Young people emphasised that personal motivation determined whether or not skills would be developed and used and that employers were as much interested in personal qualities as skills and qualifications. Young people also identified additional skills to those listed in Appendices 1A and 1B.

i) **Communication and interpersonal skills** were the most valued life-skills among young people. Interpersonal life-skills were identified by young people as essential in every situation, leisure, family and friend relationships, work and school or study.

Communication and interpersonal skills were seen as relevant, even essential for self-promotion and success in leisure, friendship, and employment contexts. In family contexts, these skills were perceived as necessary for maintaining harmonious relationships. Young people in all the localities repeatedly mentioned the everyday requirements for communicating and negotiating with people, such as with shop assistants, employers, friends, family, and work colleagues. They saw communication skills as necessary in helping to promote their own interests and to cope with everyday life.

While basic numeracy and literacy were also seen as fundamental skills, young people consider these are of limited value without reasonably developed interpersonal skills and communication skills.

"It is no good having the other skills [numeracy and literacy] if you can't deal with other people. You need to be able to get on. You are shy when you're young but you learn to come out of your shell from watching and experience"

(community education project member, Gateshead)

Communication enables you to mix and get on with others ... get on with others in school work and university ... Communication, can't get through life without it.

(sixth formers, Scotland)

ii) Young people frequently identified **literacy and numeracy skills** as crucial. Comments were often couched in terms of employability and the requirement to be literate and numerate in today's society.

"A mature student ... he'll want to better himself, get a better job."

(youth club member, Scotland)

"you've got to be able to read, write, count, concentrate ... you're always going to need these in work ... and in life."

(job club member, Tyneside)

iii) It was evident that some skills, such as **critical thinking or problem solving**, were more difficult to depict in photographs than others or would require a greater level of reflection on the part of young people to 'uncover' them. However, the nature of the interviews, involving pairs or small groups of young people encouraged young people to interact and 'less visible' skills were often discussed.

"She's learning to be with others and not be the centre of attention"
(college student, Gateshead)

"you have to cope with friend's friends you might not like" (sixth former, Gateshead)

iv) **Information and communication technology skills** were only identified as necessary in those photographs showing a computer or a mobile phone. These skills are discussed in more detail below.

"Mobile telephones! You've got to understand all of the functions and how to get the best out of them." *(rural community education project, Gateshead)*

Computer skills were not mentioned spontaneously in discussions of other everyday tasks.

Information and technology skills were downplayed by the young people in the study. Although regarded as important for leisure and employment activities, they are not considered as essential. Young people identified no particular difficulties in acquiring such skills as and when needed. Basic literacy and numeracy were seen as prerequisite skills necessary for accessing new technology, particularly computers. Young people pointed out that the skills required often related to the programmes and packages to be used. Numeracy is useful for some spreadsheet or design work, literacy is necessary for reading instructions and programmes, typing for wordprocessing and creative skills for art programmes. Coordination skills were also perceived as useful.

There was a difference of opinion in terms of how helpful school could be in developing information and technology skills; the lack of breadth and depth of computer studies and activities were heavily criticised. Employment experience, using a computer at home and friends' advice were seen by many young people as more useful sources of such skills. The family was also a valuable source of assistance.

v) In a further two areas young people identified skills which were not in the tables of life-skills. The most often identified area was **physical skills** and **motor coordination**. These skills were identified in nine photographs, a half of those used, and included practising a dance routine with friends, gardening, preparing food, driving, playing cards, using a mobile phone, arranging hair and makeup, playing a musical instrument and using a computer play station.

"You have to be able to use tools and equipment" *(sixth former, Gateshead)*

"She's needed hand and eye coordination, measuring amounts"
(sixth former, Scotland)

The second area was creative and aesthetic skills. These were identified in six photographs, almost a third of those used, including devising dance routines, gardening, preparing food, arranging hair and makeup, playing a musical instrument and window shopping.

"You can vary things in cookery, be creative, try out different things"

(sixth former, Gateshead)

"Food has to look good. Cooking needs presentation skills."

(community project, Scotland)

vi) It was clear from the interviews that young people saw the acquisition and deployment of life-skills as multi-dimensional and multifaceted with few, if any, situations where single skills would be utilised. Young people suggested a range of life-skills would need to be deployed in most settings. **Other life-skills** they commonly identified were:

- problem-solving skills
  - working out the most appropriate bus routes
- cognitive skills
  - understanding concepts of time or working out appropriate answers for a job application form
- critical thinking and self reflection
  - assessing one's qualities when applying for a job, making a commitment, or assessing how to best to get on in the work place, understanding power structures in an organisation.
- memory skills
  - remembering the way to shops, facts when studying for a test.

Clearly all the skills identified are transferable. Indeed much of the discussion highlighted the development and use of skills across different contexts and in different settings. For example, young people perceived that communication skills developed through work assisted personal interactions in their social lives and family relationships.

The role of knowledge and personal qualities

Young people drew us back, again and again, to the importance of certain personal characteristics in ensuring effective deployment of skills. They indicated that skills on their own are insufficient. Qualities such as commitment, motivation and patience are seen as essential for success.

At the same time young people also stressed the need for pre-existing knowledge to perform efficiently. They frequently noted that many tasks in leisure, work and school require specific knowledge. In learning to drive, a knowledge of road signs is important. Knowledge of hygiene and safety in the preparation of food can be as important as an ability to operate cookers and measure and mix ingredients.

"You have to read the instructions and know about measures when you make its food. You have to stay calm when the kid is crying. You learn to know when it is hungry and when it wants to play." *(job club member, Tyneside)*

"He'll need to budget with his money. Know how to act around children, watch his language." *(sixth former, Scotland)*

Young people's views on what life-skills employers seek

While young people were able to identify specific and general skills supported by work experience they also identified those life-skills which they thought were most valued by employers. Young people believed that employers shared their primary emphasis on communication and interpersonal skills. Additionally, literacy and numeracy skills were thought to be strongly valued by employers. While skills specific to the particular type of employment were seen as advantageous it was these general transferable skills which allowed people to adapt to differing employment situations and demands.

The majority of young people believed they had at least a competent level of communication and interpersonal skills perceived as most important to employers. This view was often supported by recounting previous work experiences where they

believed they had performed sufficiently well to allow them to conclude that they were suitably skilled. Complex testing would be required to assess how well founded this confidence is. The conclusion is that the majority of work experiences undertaken by young people contributed positively to their confidence and self esteem.

A number of young people suggested that employers sought particular personal qualities as much as skills and qualifications. These qualities included: having determination, possessing a positive outlook, honesty, punctuality and a willingness to learn.

How are the key life-skills acquired?

Young people talked about how they acquired life-skills and what they saw as the most important influences in this process. These influences included: employment (including work experience), education and training, school, family and friends, and the media. Young people's responses highlighted the importance of certain dispositions and pre-requisite knowledge which can facilitate the effective operation and development of life-skills. This section discusses these influences and their role in the practice and acquisition of young people's life-skills.

Employment

Work experience was identified by young people as the most valuable source of life-skills. Work, either in the form of placements arranged by education services or through an actual job, was viewed by almost all the young people as important for their life-skill development. Among those young people with a history of broken school attendance, often combined with few formal qualifications, many reported having developed communication and organisational skills through work experience. Other young people engaged in further and higher education courses also suggested that their work experience provided them with opportunities to develop useful life-skills including those associated with dealing with finance. Broader benefits were also identified by young people, one interviewee suggested that:

> *"[Work experience] helps lessen the culture shock you get after leaving school if you don't have the confidence and social skills that go with work experience."*
>
> *(sixth former, Scotland).*

The main life-skills fostered by work experience and identified by young people are discussed below.

Communication skills

Young people see a range of sources and influences as responsible for the development of these important communication skills. They perceive that they can 'pick them up' naturally, developing through the experience of everyday life from infancy, as they communicate with parents and siblings. School continues the development of these interrelated communication skills. Work experience and employment are considered the most important influences on the development of communication skills especially for experience for the ways in which working with others and dealing with the public experiences that promote their interpersonal and communication skills. Many of

these young people spoke of a growing awareness of the need to deploy a range of interpersonal and communication skills in different circumstances. Specific communication skills fostered by work experience included:

- developing confidence and strategies to talk to people – for example, those in supervisory positions or new contacts
- developing tact, tolerance and patience – for example, in dealing with argumentative customers or annoying work situations
- learning to appreciate the views of others
- learning to trust and rely on others
- learning to teach and train others
- learning to take instructions and delegate tasks
- developing a sense of humour.

Organisational skills

Skills related to time and task management were identified by young people as benefits arising from their work experience. They regularly highlighted the value of work experience in "preparing you for the real world of work". Work environments were viewed by young people as instrumental in promoting skills and awareness about employment responsibilities and strategies to meet these.

> *"You have to be able to take and follow instructions ... know about timekeeping and punctuality ... learn the safety procedures."* *(sixth formers, Scotland)*

Technology skills

In some instances, young people's work experience included working with a range of technologies such as: computers, printers, photocopiers, cash registers, cookers and tools for maintenance and repair. While these experiences helped promote specific skills related to the operation of the technology, such skills were seen as job specific, less important and transferable than communication and interpersonal competence.

Communication skills contributed to overcoming difficulties encountered when using new technology. They were described as playing a role when approaching appropriate people and negotiating to obtain assistance. Young people also commented on the need for effective communication when teaching, training or helping others in the use of new technology.

Literacy and numeracy skills

Most of the young people stressed that basic numeracy and literacy was essential for employment recruitment and subsequent engagement with work. In addition, work experience was seen to contribute to literacy and numeracy skills which then increased young people's prospects for continued or further employment. During work, young people experienced

- learning to convert imperial to metric measures
- carrying out measurement tasks in different settings
- in building, retail, mechanical and gardening situations
- developing skills concerned with money calculation
- developing mathematical and literacy skills related to sorting and record keeping.

Other skills emerging from employment experience

Young people were keenly aware that work experience helped develop their critical abilities. A small number cited examples of analysing the specific task requirements of work, then pursuing the development of abilities which would allow them to effectively complete such tasks and at the same time further their employment prospects. Commitment to timekeeping and punctuality were seen by the majority as important dispositions in supporting continued and further work prospects.

A number of other skills, transferable to family life, were identified as emerging from particular work experiences. These included cooking and food preparation, car maintenance and caring skills developed through working with children and elderly people.

Educational services

This research involved contacting young people through a number of different avenues including secondary schools, local community education services, voluntary organisations and careers services. During the interviews many young people reported valuable contributions made to their life-skills by these providers.

School

School was identified as an important source of literacy and numeracy skills and other subject specific skills. In comparison with work experience or community education and voluntary projects, school was viewed by young people as less influential in developing their communication and interpersonal skills. Given the continuing emphasis on personal and social education and development in the curriculum in Scotland and England this is of particular note. In June 1999, the National Advisory

Group on personal, social and health education (PSHE) stressed the role schools have in facilitating young people's skills related to becoming informed, responsible members of society. If the young people in our study are indicative of young people in general, it would imply that schools need to reflect on how they can better teach aspects of the PSHE curriculum.

With the emphasis on key skills in England and Wales and on core skills in Scotland, one might expect young people to have a more positive view of their school's contribution to communication skills.

Community education services (CES), voluntary agencies and training agencies

Those young people we spoke to in CES settings in the Gateshead locality stressed the role various CES projects had played in developing their skills. The CES projects are guided by principles which aim to provide active learning processes and encourage individuals to participate in the curriculum and project work.

According to the young people involved, participation in organised activities and events have greatly enhanced their skills and confidence. Such activities are very varied and actively involve young people in their design. Among the activities mentioned by young people were:

- organising and running discos for the local community
- outdoor and sporting events
- health initiatives where the young people are trained as peer-educators
- work experience through various collaborations with local employers and services
- opportunities to take formal qualifications within a flexible programme suited to their circumstances.

In the two Scottish localities, a number of young people also commented on the positive contribution of community education, voluntary services and training providers to their skill development. In one instance, CES had maintained contact with a number of working class young people over a period of several years. While a number of the group had gone on to university, community education workers were keen to retain contact with the young people to provide support, arguing that initial university experiences can disproportionately reduce the confidence of working class students compared to middle class students. Discussions with the young people concerned confirmed this feeling and the continued contact with their youth group had helped their self confidence.

In the Scottish rural town location, community and voluntary services (like their counterparts in other rural areas) have difficulty providing services for young people outside school hours. Many young people live outwith the town and limited public transport operates in the area, with no public transport available at all in the evenings. The result has been that only one voluntary group was available (on two evenings a week) for young people actually living within the town.

The capacity for CES and other youth groups to positively influence the development of young people's life-skills is severely depressed in many rural areas.

Other sources

Family, friends and peers

While family and peers contribute to the development of a wide range of life-skills, young people primarily associate them with the development of communication and interpersonal skills. Family members provide an earlier input. The influence of peer group members begins later and increases in line with young people's experiences in the wider community.

Parents, in particular, are seen as important in supporting the initial development of literacy, numeracy, communication and interpersonal skills as well as a range of other more specific skills such as cooking, DIY, and gardening. While the view that the influence of parents diminishes as young people enter adolescence may hold some credence, young people in this study spoke of the continuing support for life-skills from parents and family members. Help had been received with job application forms, with learning to drive and with the passing on of parenting skills.

Peers and friends also play an important role in supporting the development of life-skills. These range from actively demonstrating skills to being role models. In many areas including leisure pursuits (such as computer games, sports and hobbies) through to skills required for employment and life in general (such as being shown how to operate equipment and drive a car), friends are consulted or have provided inputs which are seen as contributing to the development of associated skills.

"They have to work as a team. You learn it through socialising after school activities" *(sixth formers, Scotland)*

"They have to follow the other people's movements and steps, you learn teamwork through your experience." *(sixth former, Scotland)*

The media

The media did not figure greatly in the young people's discussions concerning life-skill influences. However, on specific topics such as cooking, hobbies, computing

and driving, the television and magazines were reported, by girls, as influential. This was the only major gender difference in the findings. Young men did not accredit the media as an influence on skill development. Young women described television and magazines as an influence on views and skills relating to their lives, in particular, on interpersonal relationships and attitudes to fashion.

"...you have to be artistic, have good colour coordination ... you need a steady hand. I learned it from magazines..." *(sixth former, Scotland)*

"It's a way of communicating, how we want others to see us. You pick it up from magazines and TV." *(CES member, Scotland)*

How can the key life-skills be better developed?

Many of the young people viewed essential skills in terms of a continuum, where they expected to develop new and existing skills to meet fresh challenges, contexts and situations. Meeting and working with new people at work and in leisure was perceived as the main purpose of communication. Those young people interviewed in CES projects and voluntary youth clubs saw the future as involving '*chasing employment*' and saw the development of relevant skills necessary to assist with this task. People with special educational needs stress they want better numeracy and literacy skills to help them find secure employment and assist them in establishing their independence.

Young people see the future as bringing new commitments such as buying a house and car, engaging in more serious relationships and bringing up children. Such events were seen by many of the young people to require corresponding skills. Financial management, budgeting and childcare skills were frequently mentioned by young people when they considered their future skills needs.

During the discussion of future skills needs young people were more likely than at any other time in the interview to talk about a need for sophisticated information technology and computing skills. Young people see a future shaped by the use of computers.

"...everything will be connected to computers ... more things controlled by computer." *(sixth former, Scotland)*

For some of the more able young people, University and College represented an important route for accessing the necessary information technology skills. Among the less academically well qualified there appeared to have been little thought about where or how such skills will be acquired.

The young people were aware of less positive aspects of adult life. Young people referred to adult life as more stressful and suggested the need for skills in order to cope.

"...you'll need to be able to turn off from work." *(sixth former, Gateshead)*

Although the research design does not focus in detail on socio-economic differences between participants, there are indications that those young people with a number of formal qualifications are more likely to have a clear view of how they intended to acquire future skills. This usually involves attending college or university. Those with few or no formal qualifications are more likely to suggest that skills would be 'picked' up when necessary. CES projects should ensure that continuing access to courses is provided for these people.

Concluding comments

Young people taking part in this research consistently stressed the central importance of communication skills for success in education and employment. Indeed, when combined with personal qualities such as motivation, patience and commitment, young people suggested the net result was highly employable individuals. While the possession of other specific abilities was seen to enhance an individual's job prospects, these abilities were clearly seen as secondary and less easily transferable. School experience was identified as an important source of literacy and numeracy skills; however, school was less influential in developing communication and interpersonal skills. Few of the young people regarded school as the primary source of information and communication technology skills.

Those young people who took part in informal learning activities suggested that such involvement had a positive impact on their confidence. However, such informal educational experiences are less common in rural areas and groups of young people resident in rural areas may be denied these opportunities.

Work experience was overwhelmingly viewed as a positive influence on life-skills. Young people readily identified work experience as directly contributory to their interpersonal abilities, confidence and leadership skills. Presently, work experience occupies a minor proportion of the secondary school curriculum. In future there will be a need to re-examine its importance.

There was some evidence to suggest that young people are relatively confident in their approach to information and communication technology. However, there was also evidence to suggest that schools were generally unable to keep pace with computer technology and teaching ICT and that young people are not being equipped with the most up-to-date skills.

The way forward

These recommendations should not be regarded as disparate. They overlap and should be addressed together. Their relative importance will change with regard to contextual circumstances.

Consideration should be given to:

1 ***Each school's curriculum*** and their adaptation to ensure that the development of life-skills is accommodated and guaranteed provision is made across all subject areas.

2 ***Work experience*** and its primacy as an arena for the development and practice of life-skills and wider dissemination of 'best practice' in arranged work experience.

3 ***Creative and aesthetic skills and motor coordination skill***s and the importance attached to these by young people; the use of creativity in original and positive responses to changing opportunities in life experience.

4 ***Interagency cooperation*** and how the value of learning opportunities, particularly the development of life-skills, can be enhanced through such cooperation.

5 ***Information and communication technology*** and how curriculum provision, courses and teaching, can keep abreast of developments.

6 ***Socially disadvantaged young people*** and their poverty of aspiration; their particular needs for additional provision and for role models who are successfully employed.

7 ***Community education services*** and their importance to those living in rural areas; the ways in which they can make provision which compensates social disadvantage.

8 ***Learning support*** for young people to help them take control of their skill development needs; for employers, trainers and teachers to help them change their practice to meet the needs of young people in changing circumstances.

9 ***The promotion of a culture of learning*** including encouraging individuals to learn and continuing to remove the varied barriers to learning.

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Appendices

1A: Life-skills Matrix for 16 year olds

1B: Life-skills Matrix for 21 year olds

TABLE 3: LIFE-SKILLS MATRIX FOR 16 YEAR OLDS
(Constructed in consultation with young people)

Life-skill	Basic life tasks	Family and close relationships	Work (School where appropriate)	Leisure
Literacy/communication	Job applications, map reading, forms - reading and completion (e.g. tax, bills)	Family and close relationship correspondence	Understanding work related literature and instructions. Writing at work. Finding information.	Magazines/papers, reading of literature associated with hobbies (instructions, info on CDs packaging)
Numeracy	Personal finance and budget, weights and measures for shopping. Concepts of time	Work out contributions to family funds	Work-specific calculations School - curricular areas (maths physics etc.)	Calculation specific to leisure pursuits e.g. sports Estimating costs for leisure pursuits and interests
Inter-personal	Others: Negotiation with the public and authority Handling conflict. Self: regulating personal behaviour; personal appearance. Constructively cope with stress and tension	Establishing and coping with relationships within and across generations and status. Dealing with family events	Negotiating with colleagues (inc. different status). Instruction, advice, personal responsibility and professional conduct Carry out agreed responsibilities (Work rules and norms)	Accessing and interacting with different groups in differing leisure contexts. Teamwork, negotiating what activities to do
Critical thinking	Analytical processes, considering implications of options, making informed decisions. Evaluating (e.g. Diet and exercising regime) Develop understanding of power structures	Relationship decisions particularly girl/boyfriend issues (e.g. whether to go out with someone, sexual health, contraception)	Assessing work situation and priorities, job change and search,'	Decisions about leisure pursuits, strategy simulations, risk assessment related to different activities ranging from dangerous sports to the use of particular substances)
Problem solving	Working out everyday tasks (e.g. DIY, journeys) Dealing with contingencies and emergencies. Identify strengths and weaknesses. Continually assess developments	Arranging and planning family events (e.g. holidays)	Work-specific tasks, i.e. task allocation, time-management. Continually assess developments	Planning events and activities and dealing with related contingencies
ICT	Competent and safe use of household electrical products (inc. telephone, microwave/cooker etc.) Cash dispensers	Family use of information electronics in home (see leisure)	Use of work-related ICT (word processing, data entry, programming, Internet etc.)	Use of electronic entertainment products, e.g.. video, games consoles, computers, CD players etc.

Appendix 1B

TABLE 4 : LIFE-SKILLS MATRIX FOR 21 YEAR OLDS
(constructed in consultation with young people)

Life-skill	Basic life tasks	Family and close relationships	Work (School where appropriate)	Leisure
Literacy/communication	Job applications, map reading, Driving test, forms - reading and completion (e.g. tax, credit applications bills)	Letter writing, helping with homework, basis for communicating varied info to family	Understanding work related literature and instructions. Writing at work. Finding information	Magazines/papers, reading of literature associated with hobbies (instructions, info on C.Ds packaging)
Numeracy	Personal finance and budget (e.g. rent, loans), weights and measures for shopping and DIY Concepts of time.	Family budgeting, contributing to family funds, allocation of finance among children	Work specific calculations	Calculation specific to leisure pursuits e.g. sports Estimating costs for leisure pursuits and interests
Inter-personal	Others: Negotiation with the public and authority. Handling conflict. Self: regulating personal behaviour. Personal appearance. Constructively cope with stress and tension	Establishing and coping with relationships within and across generations and status. Dealing with family events	Negotiating with colleagues of different status. Instruction, advice, personal responsibility and professional conduct (Work rules and norms)	Accessing and interacting with different groups in differing leisure contexts. Teamwork, negotiating what activities to do
Critical thinking	Analytical processes, considering implications of options, making informed decisions. Evaluating (e.g. Diet and exercising regime) Develop understanding of power structures	Relationship decisions particularly partnership issues (e.g. whether to cohabit/marry, contraception)	Assessing work situation and priorities, job change and search,	Decisions about leisure pursuits, risk assessment related to different activities (This can range from dangerous sports to the use of particular substances)
Problem solving	Working out everyday tasks (e.g. DIY, journeys), finding housing, car maintenance Dealing with contingencies and emergencies. Identify strengths and weaknesses. Continually assess developments	Arranging and planning family events (e.g. holidays), travel and childcare arrangements etc.	Work-specific tasks, i.e. task allocation, time-management. Continually assess developments	Planning events and activities and dealing with related contingencies
ICT	Competent and safe use of household electrical products (inc. Telephone, microwave/cooker etc.)	Family use of information electronics in home (see leisure)	Use of work-related ICT (word processing, computing, programming, desk-top publishing internet etc.)	Use of electronic entertainment products, e.g.. video, games consoles, computers, CD players etc.

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